

Random notes on Birds of Kerala

BY

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These notes are based on observations made by the author over a number of years, mostly in the Vandiperiyar-Peermade area of Kerala situated at c. 3000 ft. A.S.L. They should be read with reference to Sálím Ali's BIRDS OF KERALA as they are intended to supply additional information to that contained in that very comprehensive work.

Podiceps ruficollis (Pallas). Indian Little Grebe or Dabchick

Occurs on the lakes in the High Range 4000 ft. A.S.L. Observed on Periyar Lake (3,000 ft.) on 16th and 17th August 1969. A solitary bird in breeding plumage.

Phalacrocorax niger (Vieillot). Little Cormorant

Occasionally straggles up to the Periyar Lake, 3,000 ft. A.S.L. Usually in parties of five or six birds in hot weather.

Ardea cinerea Linnaeus. Eastern Grey Heron

I have seen it during most months of the year on the Periyar Lake but have no record of it breeding there.

Butorides striatus (Linnaeus). Indian Little Green Bittern

Rather uncommon on the Periyar Lake and stream beds in the Peermade area, 3,000-3,500 ft. A.S.L.

Dupetor flavicollis (Latham). Black Bittern

Rare on the edge of the Periyar Lake. I have three sight records.

Elanus caeruleus vociferus (Latham). Blackwinged Kite

Not very uncommon in Peermade area. Resident? Nests in *Albizzia* and *Grevillea* trees in tea plantations, June to September. A pair was once seen mating on a high tension line, a truly acrobatic performance! Its call is a rather high-pitched 'choee' followed by a churring note.

Pandion haliaetus haliaetus (Linnaeus). Osprey

Occurs on the Periyar Lake from October to May. The earliest record I have of the arrival of this bird, is the one seen on 16th and 17th August 1969 on the Lake.

Falco tinnunculus objurgatus (Baker). Indian Kestrel

Found nesting in May in Peermade area. Sometimes nests in open cavities in trees on plantations. Once seen nesting on the flat top of an old tree stump in the Periyar Lake about 16 feet above the water level.

Coturnix chinensis (Linnaeus). Bluebreasted Quail

I have once seen a single bird in October in elephant grass (*Imperata*) at Thanikudi near the head-water of the Periyar Lake. The bird ran a few feet in front of me for some distance before 'freezing' thus making identification possible.

Perdica erythrorhyncha (Sykes). Painted Bush Quail

I have found nests with eggs in October at Peermade.

Rallina eurizonoides amauroptera (Jerdon). Banded Crake

I have sight records of this species every month of the year in Vandiperiyar. The alarm note is a subdued 'chuck-chuck'.

In September 1956 a pair were flushed out of the Tea by my dog and shortly afterwards a black downy chick ran out from under the bushes and took cover again on seeing me.

In July of the same year 3 similar black chicks were brought to me but I could not identify them. They all died within 24 hours in spite of my efforts to feed them.

In October 1960 I caught a quick sight of what I thought was a Banded Crake running into lantana scrub but the identification was uncertain. The bird was followed by three small black downy chicks such as I have described above.

Circumstantial evidence indicates that the Banded Crake breeds here but I have yet to find a nest.

In November 1967 a single bird flew into my sitting room through an open window at 8 p.m. I released it in the garden.

Amaurornis fuscus zeylonicus Baker. Ruddy Crake

Seen nesting in June on small island in a pond at Vandiperiyar.

Numenius phaeopus (Linnaeus). Whimbrel

A single straggler seen on the Peermade golf course on 15th August 1962. 3,500 ft. A.S.L. About 50 miles from the sea coast.

Arenaria interpres (Linnaeus). Turnstone

A small flock observed on sea shore near Alleppey pier feeding in areas fouled by people. October 1960.

Capella minima (Brünnich). Jack Snipe

Occurs occasionally in paddy areas at Kumili 3,000 ft. A.S.L.

Clamator coromandus (Linnaeus). Redwinged Crested Cuckoo

Very rare. I have only two sight observations in Peermade, January 1967 and January 1970.

Clamator jacobinus (Boddaert). Pied Crested Cuckoo

Occasionally seen in Vandiperiyar 3,000 ft. A.S.L. in dry weather. A pair once remained for more than two months, May/June, near or in my garden. They called to each other frequently.

Cacomantis sonneratii (Latham). Banded Bay Cuckoo

I have records of it in the Peermade Hills for all months except August and September.

I have seen young birds being fed by Ioras (May) and Red-whiskered Bulbuls (April).

Otus bakkamoena Pennant. Collared Scops Owl

Resident at Peermade—Vandiperiyar—3,000 ft. Usually around plantation bungalows, where they have been known to breed in holes under the eaves.

In one bungalow I occupied they were very tame and would sit on open windows at night and on one occasion actually entered the house.

Bubo nipalensis Hodgson. Forest Eagle Owl

I quote from my note-book :—

‘On 9-2-1963 when sleeping in a Vullum (dug out canoe) on the Periyar Lake I was awoken by loud screaming which I attribute to this owl. The scream has been likened to that made by a woman in terror but it could also be said to be like the sound made by a person blowing violently through a blade of grass held between cupped hands.’

Shortly after being woken up by this screaming, a large owl, clearly visible in the moonlight, flew over the boat.

Bubo zeylonensis (Gmelin). Brown Fish Owl

Not uncommon at 3,000 ft. Peermade—Vandiperiyar. Its eerie call is considered to be very unpropitious by plantation labourers.

It is fairly alert during day-light and flies without difficulty when approached too closely.

Caprimulgus indicus Latham. Indian Jungle Nightjar

Not uncommon in the Periyar Lake environs during the dry weather but it is not usually heard during the monsoon and I suspect that it is a local migrant to the dryer zone outside the S.W. monsoon belt. However, on the nights of 15th and 16th August 1969, I heard the call near the Periyar Lake. This is the first occasion I have heard this bird during the monsoon months and its presence may have been due to the excep-

tionally fine spell we enjoyed at that time. I heard it again on 1st September 1969, near Aranya Nivas Hotel at the Periyar Lake.

It is possible also that the Great-eared Nightjar, (*Eurostopodus macrotis* Vigors) and Franklin's Nightjar, *Caprimulgus affinis* Horsfield, which occur quite frequently in the dry weather around the Periyar Lake move away to the dryer zone during the monsoon. This dry zone which is not generally affected by the S.W. monsoon is only about five-ten miles away to the east of the Periyar Lake in Tamil Nadu. I have found Franklin's Nightjar there in August.

Caprimulgus affinis Horsfield. Franklin's Nightjar

As far as I can make out a dry weather visitor only from October to May.

I have found a 'nest' with a single downy fledgling on 8-v-1966 on the shore of the Periyar Lake and on 8-iv-1967 I found two more nests, one with two eggs and one with a single egg also on the shore of the Periyar Lake.

All the 'nests' were shallow hollows on bare ground in stony areas. The mother bird sits very closely flying off only when nearly trodden on. A quiet 'chuck-chuck' is uttered when disturbed. She does not fly for a long distance but usually alights within sight of the nests on the ground where her protective colouring makes her nearly indistinguishable.

Ceryle rudis Linnaeus. Pied Kingfisher

In the past twenty years has become quite common on the Periyar Lake. I think this may be due to the fact that several suitable breeding cliffs at the waters edge have not been submerged for many years because of the extra off-take from the Lake since the hydroelectric generators at Lower Camp were commissioned. In previous times the water level always used to rise above such banks and cliffs at least once a year.

Halcyon pileata (Boddaert). Blackcapped Kingfisher

A pair was observed by me in a secluded backwater of the Periyar Lake on 27-iv-1963.

I have seen this species on several occasions at a tank near Uthamapalayam in the Cumbum valley of Madurai District, Tamil Nadu, since 1961. This tank is about 20 miles from the Periyar Lake but a considerable distance from the sea coast.

Merops leschenaulti Vieillot. Chestnut-headed Bee-eater

Breeds in April and May in the Peermade area.

Upupa epops Linnaeus. Hoopoe

Appears to ascend to the Peermade Hills in the dry weather only but I have records of seeing the species on 22-vi-1964 during the monsoon.

I have no evidence of its breeding in this area but once in February I observed a bird flying with something held in its beak as if it was on its way to feed young.

Megalaima zeylanica (Gmelin). Green Barbet

Occurs in the deciduous low elevation jungle to the east of Kumili just outside the Kerala State boundary. Does not appear to ascend to the wet zone surrounding the Periyar Lake.

Jynx torquilla Linnaeus. Wryneck

Single bird seen at Vandiperiyar on 10th March 1967.

Picus xanthopygaeus (J.E. & G.R. Gray). Little Scalybellied Green Woodpecker

Observed nesting in March and April in this area. Both sexes appear to incubate.

Dendrocopus nanus Vigors. Pigmy Woodpecker

Observed nesting March, April, May.

Pitta brachyura (Linnaeus). Indian Pitta

Earliest arrival date recorded October 3rd but usually regularly arrives between 10th and 18th October.

Latest departure date recorded 19th May.

Hirundo concolor Sykes. Dusky Crag Martin

This little bird has become increasingly common in Peermade and Vandiperiyar and now many bungalows and tea factories provide nesting sites for it.

Its favourite time for breeding is August-September but I have also observed it nesting in April. It is possible that sometimes two broods are raised but I have yet to verify this.

The nest takes about 12 days to complete before the first egg is laid. Eggs appear to be laid in the early morning. Old nests are sometimes patched up and re-lined in the following year. Both sexes incubate and feed young. Young birds have pale grey almost white gapes.

Lanius vittatus Valenciennes. Baybacked Shrike

I have one sight record of this species at Peermade (3,500 ft.) on 15th March 1966.

Lanius schach Linnaeus. Rufousbacked Shrike

Very rare in this area. I have only one sight record on 31st January 1969 in Vandiperiyar.

Lanius cristatus Linnaeus. Brown Shrike

Our commonest shrike during winter months. Earliest date of arrival recorded 16th September but nearly every year arrives between 20th and 30th September.

Latest departure date recorded 8th May but it is usually very regular in leaving during the first week of May.

Dicurus leucophaeus Vieillot. Indian Grey Drongo

Winter visitor only, arriving in October and leaving in April.

Artamus fuscus Vieillot. Ashy Swallow-Shrike

Nests March, April. I once found a nest in a large hole in a hollow tree stump in the Periyar Lake. These dead tree stumps provide good nesting sites for this species.

Acridotheres tristis (Linnaeus). Common Myna

Though becoming more abundant at Kumili (3,000 ft.) it is still rare at this elevation. Parents have been observed feeding young in a hollow tree in the Periyar Lake in August.

Corvus splendens Vieillot. House Crow

In the last fifteen years this species has become more numerous at Kumili and in the villages along the main Kumili-Kottayam highway at about 3,000 ft. The species is by no means common at this elevation but appears to be becoming well established along with the increase in the human population.

Rhopocichla atriceps (Jerdon). Blackheaded babbler

I once brushed against an old nest at sundown and five or six fully grown birds burst out of it. It would seem that parties of this species roost together in old nests.

Garrulax jerdoni Blyth. Whitebreasted Laughing Thrush

A small isolated colony is resident at the top of the Annanthambi Hills at about 4,000 ft. This is the highest point in the Vandiperiyar-Peermade district and it is interesting to note that these birds never seem to descend any lower although 'rubus' is to be found on the lower slopes of the hills. Apart from this colony in its very restricted habitat I have not observed the species anywhere else in the district even on the tops of other hills with similar vegetation.

Muscicapa latirostris Raffles. Brown Flycatcher

I have observed the species in every month of the year here but it becomes more numerous in the winter months.

I have found nests in March, April and May and have observed young being fed in June.

The nests I have seen have all been rather high up in trees where branches join the main stem, the *Grevillea robusta* being a favourite tree.

I have heard a faint twittering song in January.

Muscicapa parva Bechstein. Redbreasted Flycatcher

As Sálím Ali (1969), writes this species is very rare. I have only two records of having seen it in Vandiperiyar on 14th March 1948 and 9 March 1971. Both males.

Prinia hodgsonii Blyth. Franklin's Wren Warbler

Nests commonly at 3,000 ft. elevation in Peermade district. I have found a nest with young as late as September.

Prinia socialis Sykes. Ashy Wren Warbler

The breeding season extends until September in Peermade.

Orthotomus sutorius (Pennant). Tailor Bird

The breeding season extends until September in Peermade.

Schoenicola platyura (Jerdon). Broadtailed Grass Warbler

During May/June grass warblers attract attention by their linnnet-like song which is uttered from the top of a bush or while soaring 10-15 feet above the ground. When soaring the tail feathers are fanned.

I have found a nest with two young in August (26-viii-1956) and another nest with three eggs, subsequently damaged by dogs and deserted, in July (7-vii-1963).

The nests were very well concealed in clumps of imperata grass (illuk) about 3 feet above the ground. They were ball-shaped, rather untidy, with a hole at the side. They were constructed from blades of coarse grass lined with finer grass stems.

It seems that only one bird builds, presumably the female, while her mate stays nearby entertaining her with song from vantage points close by.

The eggs were light pinkish with reddish brown specks.

Erithacus brunneus (Hodgson). Indian Blue Chat

For some time after its arrival in its winter quarters its song can be heard throughout October and November.

Saxicoloides fulicata Linnaeus. Indian Black-backed Robin

From about March 1965 to about March 1968 a female bird resided in a patch of waste land near the main Kottayam-Kumili road not far from Vandiperiyar. She seemed to keep company with Pied Bush chats.

She must have straggled up from the low country, probably Tamil Nadu, and become stranded because she is the only specimen of the species I have seen in this district in over thirty years.

Monticola solitarius (Linnaeus). Blue Rock Thrush

The earliest arrival date I have recorded is 27th September but this species usually appears here early in October.

Zoothera wardii (Blyth). Pied Ground Thrush

I have two observation records. A male on 8-iv-1956 and female on 18-xii-1960. The former at 3,000 ft. in Vandiperiyar and the latter in Peermade at 3,500 ft.

Motacilla indica Gmelin. Forest Wagtail

The earliest date of arrival recorded here by me is 19th September and the latest I have seen it is 6th May.

Motacilla flava Linnaeus. Grey-headed Yellow Wagtail

Small parties of yellow wagtails occasionally visit the marshy area of the Periyar Lake near Thekkadi at 3,000 ft. A.S.L. during the winter months especially during October, November and December.

Motacilla maderaspatensis Gmelin. Large Pied Wagtail

Nested in the attic loft of Munjamullay Tea Factory, Vandiperiyar, 18th November 1959.

Nectarinia asiatica (Latham). Indian Purple Sunbird

This species and the Small Sunbird, *N. minima*, are the only two sunbirds seen in the Peermade area and the population fluctuates considerably, the greatest number being seen in dry weather.

Breeding here appears to be uncommon. I have found only two nests of the Purple Sunbird in March and have not observed any nesting of the Small Sunbird.

Zosterops palpebrosa Temminck. Nilgiri White-eye

Breeds in September and October in this area as well as March to May.

Ploceus philippinus Linnaeus. Baya

Since 1959 there has been a breeding colony at Kumili, 3,000 ft., presumably because the paddy cultivation in the area has increased considerably in recent times.